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ABSTRACT

This discussion gives a rationale for providing options for extrapolation within the context of composition topics. Whether topics are specified by someone other than the writer or are self-chosen, they "fructify" according to the composer's sense of purpose and audience. Developing such a sense has not been a prominent part of the typical school composition assignment. A teacher can productively intervene in the invention process by constructing assignments that do not restrict subject matter but that do invite extensive exploration of specific composer/audience/subject relationships. Heightening students' awareness of these relationships can be a more helpful teaching strategy than the invocation of customary conventions of composition form. (KS)

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COMPOSITION TOPICS THAT FRUCTIFY

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I have adopted an organic metaphor as the most conspicuous part of my title because I am thinking about a living process--a process of composing with words. As we know, most of that process is invisible, inaccessible to another's or even, perhaps, our own inspection. It is a process made up of what we loosely and probably arbitrarily classify as intellectual and emotional elements, often so tightly bound together and so persistently interacting that we cannot say which is which or which is more important in bringing forth a piece of discourse.

Because I believe that organic metaphors are probably as close as we can come to describing and explaining much of the process of composition, I assert that they are of great interest to us as teachers of composition and that pursuing them in some detail may be instructive to us in our efforts to help young people compose with words, both oral and written.

FRUCTIFY: tr., to cause to produce fruit; make fruitful or productive
intr., to bear fruit
(The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language)

I am presuming to help you think about how you can help your students find topics for speaking and writing and then develop them in ways that satisfy both themselves and their audiences. To do this, I have three

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questions to guide my remarks and your pursuit of them:

1. Where does a topic for composition come from?
2. How can a teacher help students to invent the development of a topic?
3. Why may finding and developing topics that fructify be the most important part of the composition process?

In answering these questions, I think foremost of teachers in fairly conventional kinds of school and college classrooms, of both spoken and written composition, and of occasions for composition not limited just to classrooms. What I say arises largely out of my own teaching of and thinking about composition, with aid and support from numerous other writers.

Where does a topic for composition come from? There are two main sources. First, a topic which is selected and assigned by a teacher, an editor (if one is writing for a newspaper or magazine), a program chairperson (if one is to be a speaker), or an employer (if one's job involves formalized speaking and writing). Alternatively, the topic is self-chosen by the composer to fit the roughed-out specifications of an assignment or to fit the composer's own internally generated need to compose. I believe that both of these main sources have a proper place in classrooms and that teachers can accommodate them. I believe, further, that among the principal means for accommodating them is a thorough examination of the functions of purpose and audience in all deliberate communication. (I am sure that purpose and audience have pronounced effects on communication that is not

so deliberate, but I am restricting my examination to language which is carefully composed, often revised or reexamined, and generally intended to have some durable effect or value. That definition excludes the language of "phatic communion," those ritualized uses like "How are you doing, John?" which serve more as social cement than as conveyor of explicit and developed ideas.) When we think of selection of a topic as a necessary function of specifying purpose and audience, we accomplish more of the composition than may be immediately obvious.

Consider a few specific topics that might be assigned by a program chair, an editor, an employer, a teacher:

-describe and explain at our next community club meeting the plans for widening a major arterial in our community, and show the residents how it may affect their travel, their property, and the general health of the community

-write an account of how the recent lack of snow has affected the owners of nearby ski resorts, an account to be published in Sunday's edition of this newspaper

-tell a group of employees about the proposed changes in their health and accident coverage

-explain your opinion on the values and uses of grades in schools and colleges as a basis for our discussion of a possible policy for grading in this class.

In each of these four cases, a specific purpose is an inherent part of the assignment, a specific audience is included, and presumably each of the hypothetical writers, because of their known backgrounds and conditions of employment or enrollment, has special knowledge or interest in the topic.

If these conditions are indeed met, then it appears that the assignment of the topics is legitimate, and the assigner can reasonably expect a piece of discourse which is at least intended to meet the specifications. Topic, purpose, and audience are in harmony, a harmony which successful communication must have.

Let's look at the teacher-assigned specific topic more closely, though. As I think about the many composition topics I know to have been suggested and used, I recall that many of them did not meet these conditions. The teacher-assigned topic may arise from something read, discussed, or observed in common, but the likely purpose is less to inform someone else than it is to inform the student, both about the topic itself and about the act of composing. In other words, the typical school composition topic is turned in on itself, not serving a purpose in the world at large or even for the other people in that one classroom, not directed at any audience in particular but at a teacher who may subsequently "correct" it. When judged by the criteria of "real world" communication, the typical composition topic and its treatment are dry-runs, very dry and often lethargically run. Multiply the occasions for this kind of composition and you will have ample evidence of the deadness and vacuousness of much school writing. As the rhetorical context narrows and detaches itself almost entirely from language used for deliberate purposes in solving problems of living, the resulting composition becomes a desiccated thing.

Furthermore, since an ostensible purpose of assigning topics for composition is to teach teachniques of composition, there is a common tendency to oversimplify and to reduce to formulas the stages of composition. Teachers and textbooks say essentially this: 1) select your topic, 2) think about

what you want to say, 3) plan your ideas, preferably with a written outline, 4) write a first draft, 5) revise and edit that draft, 6) present your composition to the teacher, 7) allow time for the teacher to evaluate the composition, 8) study the evaluation and use the advice in dealing with your next composition topic. Most of us would probably concede that composition does not proceed in quite such linear fashion, that the neatness of this linearity is only superficial, that the normal composition process has many more curlicues and switchbacks than this list suggests. Yet, we may be tempted to say, composing ought to proceed in this fashion, and it is tempting to think that professional writers proceed so. Understanably, perhaps, we prefer to hide our messes, and actual composition is often messy. I assert that selecting a topic is not the decisive and logically first act that this list makes it seem. The topic is not just the word or phrase that may briefly express the focus of the discourse; it is what each speaker or writer adds to that word or phrase that is the topic, or what the discourse is really about, and that is an emergent part of the discourse. Therefore, describing the parts of the composition process must include awareness of the ways that such elements of the rhetorical situation as sense of purpose and audience impinge on the process. If the composer has only a vague sense or is confused about the necessary limits imposed by a specific purpose and audience, that composer is severely handicapped in composing deliberately. It is out of a heightened awareness of controlling purpose and audience that thought about the topic grows, and the act of composing itself alters the nature of the topic, its significance to the composer, and its treatment. The topic fructifies as it takes unique form in each composer. As it fructifies, the composer is articulating his or her own world via this topic

because s/he is discovering what to say about it and the saying is forcing him or her to discover.

If this idea of articulating one's own world--that is, making meaning via one's composed perceptions of the world--is a valid aim for composition, and I cannot think of a better one, then I believe that any assignment of a topic for composition should include explicit attention to the implications of purpose and audience. Every assigned topic may specify a subject (such as grading, a literary work, a current issue, a physical object), but it must specify a purpose which can seem plausible to the composer and an audience which that composer can either actually reach with the discourse or readily imagine reaching. Without these two dimensions, the topic is not a topic for composition but an inert bit of matter which cannot fructify.

When the subject matter for composition is not specified by a teacher or other agent external to the composer, the composition situation is perilously open. In fact, in schools the topicless assignment is often perceived by students as so open as to be paralyzing. Write about anything? Where do I start? Anything turns out to be more nearly a vacuum than a full reservoir of possibilities. It is quite a different matter, however, for the person who writes independently with self-generated topics. This kind of expression results from a tension to express an idea or feeling, or perhaps from that apparently universal urge to tell a story. The causes for such tension may never be fathomed, enmeshed as they are in the mysteries of human creativity. As Rollo May puts it, in his recent book, The Courage to Create (Bantam, 1976), creativity is an encounter between a human being and an objective reality, a physical world "out there." "The poet's labor is a struggle with the meaninglessness and silence of the world until he can force it to mean; until he can

make the silence answer and the Non-being be." (p. 89) It is not only the medium of poetry that permits such an encounter and gives form to the meanings wrested by it; any artistic medium will suffice. Whatever the medium, there is a state of heightened consciousness which accompanies or creates the tension; the topic arises according to the focus of that consciousness; and the choice of a form is the particular means for shaping the meanings.

I hope that none of us teachers underestimates the significance of this self-generated process, even though there may be little we can do directly to initiate or sustain it. At the least, however, we can encourage it to occur both in and out of schools. Specifically, we can ask questions about the world and human activity which cannot be conclusively answered. We can show students that literature does this all the time and that one of the principal reasons for reading literature is to be stimulated by such questions and by artful attempts to answer them. We can encourage students to ask these perplexing questions, too, and we can adroitly mention that their own writing can be a satisfying way to pursue the questions. And, as students start taking the bait, we can try to establish conditions which will encourage encounters with the meaningless to fructify--conditions that include psychological space, physical space, time to create, and an authentic response to the verbal creations. If we were to take seriously our need to do these things, we might legitimately claim some contribution to the nourishment of future writers of literature, and we might even demonstrate to those less talented that self-generated writing is a fulfilling activity.

If, however, a teacher is to impose a topicless assignment, s/he needs to consider carefully the kind of limits which will make the assignment fructify. The phenomenon of limits as a requisite for creativity cannot be

passed over casually. Rollo May points out that "limits are not only unavoidable, they are also valuable . . . creativity itself requires limits, for the creative act arises out of the struggle of human beings with and against that which limits them." (The Courage to Create, pp. 134-5) In the case of writing, it is the form which primarily determines the limits for creativity, and it is the composer's struggles to express meaning within the form that cause the tension and the search of one's imagination. The teacher's cue, then, is to specify those aspects of form that are likely to be most stimulating to imagination and most productive of a positive kind of tension or anxiety. The student writer needs to feel that anxiety but in such a way that s/he feels that s/he is controlling it. How best to establish a sense of control? By creating a situation where the composer can visualize the choices that can be made, choices which are within his or her present repertoire of knowledge and abilities. And I assert that the best way to provide those limits and assure that each composer can make his or her own choices is to describe purpose and audience. Assuming an expository form (e.g., letter, essay, report, factual narrative), the writer's ability to germinate and develop a topic will be both enhanced and guided by his or her clear perception of the teacher-specified purpose and audience. They should be tied as closely as possible to actual needs and situations for writing in the world outside classrooms, though imagination may have to substitute for actually reaching and getting responses from all the audiences which a teacher might incorporate in writing assignments. In the topicless assignment, then, the subject for composing is left to the student, but the impetus and the limits for choice of a possible subject arise out of the

student's strong awareness of an assignment that is rhetorically specific.

Given the conviction that such an assignment is valid for teaching composition, how does a teacher help students to invent the development of a topic? Since invention, the earliest stage of finding something to say, is the hardest part of composition for most people to do and the hardest part of composition to teach, a teacher may feel most helpless in knowing how to intervene. In fact, the likelihood is that most teachers do not intervene at all. They simply say, "Start developing your ideas, perhaps by free association writing or by making an outline." Or they may talk with students about the various habits that a writer needs to establish in order to make the ideas come, habits which encourage persistence and concentration. Making such suggestions and having students discuss their various techniques are probably helpful ways of showing young writers that there are many good systems for getting writing started and that no two people are likely to go about it in exactly the same way.

However, the most regularly usable help in developing a topic is likely to be the pointing out of specific consequences of purpose and audience in each assignment.

Consider some examples of composition sequences which will strongly and actively impose limits on every stage of the composition process but which also allow the composer plenty of room for choice of subject matter and method of handling it. Note too that each purpose is integrated with a type of audience but that the composer still has room to further specify and visualize that audience. Further, notice that each of these purpose/audience situations is subject to variation so that none of them is likely to be fully

explored for any one composition and each can therefore be reused many times.

1. Describe some object so as to convey a dominant attitude toward the object, but don't overtly state that attitude; let it be inferred by the reader or listener who has also seen an object similar to the one you are describing but who is interested in experiencing this particular one through your senses. In one case, the audience wants you to adopt an "objective" attitude, one which implies that you are simply trying to give factual information about the object; this audience might be a lawyer, an administrator, an employer, or a scientist who has asked you to tell what you saw, felt, smelled, tasted, or heard. Your attitude is therefore apparently detached, dispassionate, unbiased, but of course you should not seem bored or uncaring. In another case, your audience wants to savor your less-than-objective attitude toward the object but does not want to be harangued or to be addressed with the directness of an advertisement; you need to be subtle in implying your attitude but also to be sure that one consistent attitude toward the object pervades your description.

2. Narrate an event or a series of actions involving living things, probably people or other animals, though non-living things may be elements in their actions. Your audience is someone whom you will reach in a letter, or it may be readers of a magazine in which eye-witness accounts regularly appear. This audience wants to be both emotionally and intellectually stimulated by your narrative, but you may decide whether the audience is more interested in vicariously participating in the event than in knowing your interpretation of its significance. In either case, your telling of the event should make it come alive again by making use of sensuous images.

3. Explain a process--how something works or why certain actions are performed as they are. Your aim is to clarify for your audience the interre-

lationships or reasons involved in your subject, those dimensions of it which are not obvious on the surface. Your explanation should make plain a way of observing the process which the audience had not already discovered or was unlikely to know. Since the audience has come to your explanation with a desire to be informed, you should assume the audience's ignorance of the subject but you must avoid insulting the audience's intelligence by carefully assessing related knowledge that the audience probably has.

4. State an opinion on a subject which your audience already has knowledge of and is also likely to have opinions about. If you assume that most of those opinions are quite similar to your own, you may choose to give reinforcing evidence in support of the view held in common; if you assume considerable diversity in opinion among your audience, you may choose to show why opinions contrary to yours are less valid and why a reasonable person is likely to hold your view. Your audience may be your peers, or it may be a mixed group; you should specify your target group in considerable detail.

5. Amuse and perhaps enlighten your audience by showing them a new way of looking at some part of the world--a way that arises from taking a different perspective from "normal" ways of looking and thinking. Using description, or narration, or explanation, turn something upside down, inside out, or tip it sideways--I mean either literally or figuratively--and fill your audience full of details about what is to be noticed with that new perspective. Let surprise be one of the principal effects you try to create, but consider the possible serious significance that this surprising revelation can have. You may want to imagine your audience as quite sophisticated and therefore able to apprec-

iate any clever devices of language that you can present, or you may think of the audience as reluctant to see things in new ways but more likely to be encouraged to do so by indirect means than by admonition or a totally serious approach.

I have only sketched what might be suggested to students about visualizing and targeting the purpose and audience for each assignment. In using any of these starters, you would of course discuss them in more particular ways, sometimes narrowing down the purpose and audience yourself and sometimes urging students to do it individually. I suggest such questions as the following for use in particularized discussion about audience:

-Does your audience have any background of knowledge and experience which bears upon your topic? What are some of the possible specific experiences?

-At what level of complexity and concreteness will the audience be likely to understand this topic and the way you will develop it?

-Under what physical circumstances is the audience likely to hear or read what you say about the topic?

-What would you like the audience to do or think or feel as a result of reading or hearing your composition?

-What kinds of response from the audience should you expect, and what form is it likely to come in?

-What reward might you expect from having communicated with this audience?

-What are you likely to do or think or feel as a result of having communicated with this audience?

-If other people are communicating with this audience on the same or a similar topic, what are they possibly saying? Are you in any sort of competition with those others?

-Is your audience likely to judge your communication as much by the most easily visible or audible elements of form as by the more complex elements of content and strategy?

To develop conscious awareness of these kinds of questions so that they pervade the act of composition at all stages is, I maintain, to trigger ideas for developing the topic and to give the student a focused sense of direction. The combination is more likely to make the topics fructify than formulaic instructions which propose an abstractly logical, linear series of steps. Furthermore, these considerations of purpose and audience will automatically suggest criteria for evaluating the finished composition, criteria which are not arbitrarily imposed and vaguely stated but criteria which are a specific and inherent part of that communicative act. The teacher's role is to help students articulate those criteria, inductively, and to arrange the class so that students later apply them to their fellows' compositions and formulate reasoned evaluations. Using such a process frees the teacher from being the sole judge of composition and does away with the obsolete need to "correct" students' compositions. Judgments will become much less matters of right and wrong and more nearly gradations of success in accomplishing communication goals. Do you see the shift away from the flabby, lifeless "theme" which has been so characteristic of school writing, especially beyond elementary school? If I have been at all successful in persuading you that some of our most important teaching comes

before students actually begin writing or preparing their oral compositions, I expect that the answer to this question is at least a qualified yes. I also want to make the further claim that the stage of composition that I have been describing may be the most important part of the composition process in which a teacher can intervene.

Reflect, if you will, on those other parts of composition that our textbooks tell us are directly teachable and important to composing well.

-note-taking techniques

-steps in organizing outlines

-paragraph structures

-sentence structures

-vocabulary choice

-punctuation rules

-spelling and other format requirements

-oral delivery techniques

True, there are some generalizations about these matters that seem to apply to many kinds of composition, but none of them helps much in generating composition. They usually apply after the person has determined what to say, and they tend to be heavily influenced by conventions of composing and therefore require convergence of thought, a convergence that may well occur too early in the composing process. The invention stage which I have been examining draws upon divergent, essentially creative, thought, which needs different kinds of limits or guides. The composer should perceive or feel these limits as intimately related to the shaping of thought and feeling, not as forced upon him/her prematurely by the second-order conventions of form. I referred earlier to the anxiety which is a normal part of composition and the need to make it a positive, nourishing force. The best way for a

teacher to help students use that force is to lead them into patient and attentive consideration of the expectations of their intended audiences, their reasons for wanting to meet those audiences' expectations, and the inevitable struggle with mind, feelings, and hands to understand and deal with the demands which these expectations entail. Such help will encourage students to see that the second-order conventions have a necessary and proper place in their composition efforts, but that it is not these conventions that are the significant shaping forces. When they realize that, composition may not get easier, but they may see composition for what it really is--our way of making the world mean.